

MACVICAR

AM
1944
ma



BOSTON UNIVERSITY



College of Liberal Arts
Library

Gift of

Author



BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

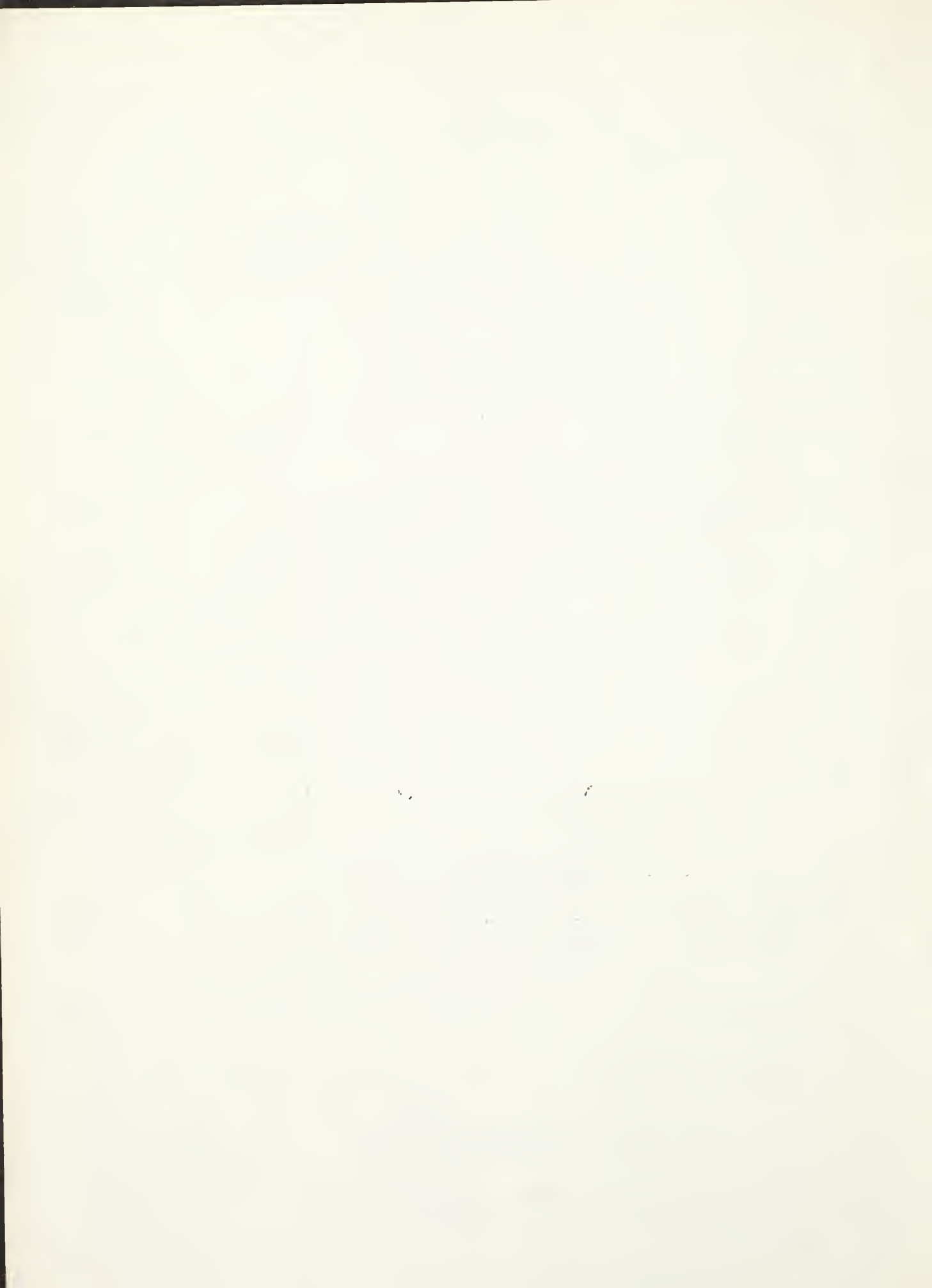
Thesis

THE HUMAN ELEMENT IN ROBERT FROST

By

Margaret Belle MacVicar

(B. A., Wheaton College, 1931)
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
1944



Apr 5
1904
100

Approved

by

First Reader.....*George M. Sneath*.....
Professor of English

Second Reader.....*Thomas R. Mather*.....
Professor of

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION	
CHAPTER I FRIENDLINESS AND NEIGHBORLINESS	1
CHAPTER II UNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN	11
CHAPTER III ROBERT FROST'S MEN	28
CHAPTER IV TENDERNESS TOWARD ANIMALS	45
CHAPTER V JOY IN LITTLE THINGS	51
CHAPTER VI SENSE OF HUMOR	61
CHAPTER VII ATTITUDE TOWARD LOVE, HOME, AND MARRIAGE	73
CHAPTER VIII CONCLUSION	77
BIBLIOGRAPHY	



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2016

<https://archive.org/details/humanelementinro00mcvi>

Introduction

Robert Frost, New England's distinguished contemporary poet, presents an interesting paradox. Born in San Francisco in 1875, the son of a Yankee father and a Scottish mother, he has written poems depicting New England life, which, rejected¹ in this country, were first published in England. Consequently, he does not owe his recognition as poet to the country which is now so proud to acclaim him as its own.

Because of his apparent failure as a poet, Robert Frost had to struggle and toil at various and varied occupations to gain a livelihood for his growing family. While he was farming at Derry, New Hampshire, and at the same time teaching classes at Pinkerton Academy, he persistently sent poems to editors who, equally persistently, sent them back. Finally, he sold his farm and with the proceeds set out for England to devote his entire time to poetry. (Until the money obtained from the purchase of the farm should give out). The result was, in 1913, the publication in London of "A Boy's Will." From then on, Robert Frost "was made".

Although the setting of the poems is that region north of Boston, Frost is not a regional poet, for, in the words of David Lambuth: "The heart of Robert Frost's poetry is unlimited by place or time, by accidents of farm life or the outward

success or failure that accompanies them."² It just happens that life's most significant events have come to him "in the garments of country life north of Boston."²

Robert Frost's main interest, with which this thesis is concerned, is human life. All aspects of life interest Frost only as they converge on the human element which is always upper-most in the poems whether they describe the heart-break-incidents in the daily life of a neurotic house-wife among the New England hills or the way a crow shook down on the poet

"The dust of snow³
From a hemlock tree."

Consequently, all of human life is in Frost's poetry: its powers, its weaknesses; its successes, its failures; its strivings almost to the point of attainment; its despair; and, finally, its searching anew because of the strange inner force which drives humans on so relentlessly whether they will or no.

Robert Frost's love of people is not, however, the all-encompassing love of the humanitarian poet clamoring for reform. His is not the voice of one crying in the wilderness of despair and disappointment, but rather is it that of hope and encouragement to man in a world somewhat awry but nevertheless a good world.

Then how is the human element brought out? Robert Frost

2. Ibid.

3. NEW HAMPSHIRE: Dust of Snow. P. 82.

pictures life in New England--not the rapid life of the twentieth century, but the more deliberate life of, perhaps, a generation ago before automobiles brought the city to the country and vice versa. With a certain wizardry of words he gives glimpses of life as vivid as the views revealed by a spotlight as it slowly explores a mountain side or lake shore bringing objects into clear, sharp relief for one brief but unforgettable moment. With the unmistakable, passionate, but quiet sincerity which springs from his own experience, Frost writes about the people with whom he has been in close contact all his life: Yankee farmers and their wives who are trying to wrest a living (only sometimes it turns out to be just a bare existence) from the stubborn, rock-studded soil. There is nothing dashing or romantic about them, yet they are so common in experience that they are uncommon in writing. And that is precisely why Frost writes about them, for his formula is:

common in experience--uncommon in writing.⁴

Indirectly he says that there is no such thing as an uninteresting clod.

Again, the humanity of the poet reveals itself in his desire for companionship and friendship. In several of his poems he has depicted the New England woman on an isolated farm grow morbid because of the loneliness which hangs over her like a pall.

As the poet is sympathetic and sincere in his character delineation, so is he humorous. Although life has its serious, somber moments, one must not be burdened or made gloomy by it. Those who fail to see events in their true perspective, are, naturally, more easily unbalanced than those who are blest with the saving grace of humor.

Appreciation of, and gratitude for small joys add up to thrills. A walk in the country, blueberrying, swinging on birches, a spring thaw are significant events in the scheme of things.

As Frost is concerned with human lives, he is concerned with small lives: birds flushed out of their nests in the thatch, a frightened little colt experiencing his first snow-fall, the cow getting gloriously drunk on apple-cider. All are treated with tender humor and understanding.

He is human because he knows how failure to adjust and adapt oneself to life can cause havoc with the delicate mechanism of the human mind. Realizing man's limitations he says: "Something must be left to God."¹

1. NEW HAMPSHIRE: Good-Bye and Keep Cold: pp. 93-94.

Chapter I

Friendliness and Neighborliness

Because he himself has lived and worked on a small New England farm, far away from the city where people are physically close, at least, Robert Frost realizes people's need of each other. Although everyone needs friends, country people especially, in the struggle and hardship of getting along, need each other not only for recreation but also for help in times of emergencies. When he is caught in a blinding snow-storm, Brother Meserve does not hesitate to knock at the Coles' door even though it is so late at night that Helen and Fred Cole are¹ asleep. Where but in the country would he have felt free to do such a thing?

Because there are no ready-made pastimes in the remote country districts, the inhabitants have to create their own amusements. After a hard day's work in the fields, however, a farmer is often too weary to go out in the evening in search of excitement. Consequently, chatting with a neighbor is his only source of relaxation. As a result of this interdependence the people in remote rural communities take time to be friendly. No matter how busy they are, they let nothing interfere with friendship. For example, although the poet knows the hoeing has to be done, he is not averse to sticking his hoe-handle into the ground--

1. MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: Snow, pp. 76-98

business-end-up--when a passer-by "slows his horse to a meaning² walk" and calls him from the road for a friendly chat. The potatoes or corn--or whatever it is--will still be there when the visit is over! What counts more is that he has made a human contact.

Not only do country people depend on each other for amusement and help in time of trouble but also in sharing of material things. Loren, although he has a houseful of children and not much else, is willing that the neighbors should pick blueberries in his pasture.

"He won't make the fact that they're rightfully his³
An excuse for keeping us other folks out," says the poet.

The classic example of this spirit of neighborliness in Frost is the poem, "Mending Wall."⁴ Fully realizing the futility of the task he is undertaking, the narrator goes along with his conservative neighbor who doggedly insists on keeping up the wall between the two farms because it has always been there, although it now separates only a pine grove and an apple orchard.

"My apples will never get across⁴
And eat the cones under the pines, I tell him."

The unimaginative Yankee, however, who insists upon following a useless tradition rather than a code of friendliness, says,
"'Good fences make good neighbors.'⁴"

2. Ibid: A Time To Talk: Page 44
3. NORTH OF BOSTON: Blueberries: p. 58.
4. Ibid: Mending Wall: p. 12, 12-13.

So they do--where there are cows. "'But here there are no cows.'" ⁴ Therefore, why erect a wall? Before the poet would build a wall, he would be careful to find out first what he was separating and if he were offending anyone. A wall separating two farms--or any two things--is useful only when necessary. As it is, the poet pities his short-sighted neighbor, who, he says:

"---moves in the darkness---
Not of woods only and the shade of trees." ⁵

No, he moves in a far more menacing darkness, the shadow of a wornout tradition which excludes all consideration of others.

Because he is reluctant about wasting time in repairing an unnecessary wall, Robert Frost proves he is not an isolationist who lives selfishly only for, and by himself. The poem might be made symbolical of two opposing forces: nationalism and internationalism. The nationalist--or isolationist--who is selfishly bent on his own gain, his own good, and his own protection--does not worry about the common good. The internationalist who is interested in universal brotherhood does not wish to lose contact with the external world by walling himself in. Refusing to cooperate with other nations produces unhealthy misunderstandings which inevitably and relentlessly lead to war. This we have learned to our sorrow and pain. Isolated countries, races, communities, families, even individuals cannot be secure,

4. Ibid. Mending Wall: p. 12, 12-13

5. Ibid. p. 12-13

for we are all bound together by common needs. What hurts one hurts all. But, fortunately, the converse is equally true: what helps one helps all.

Frost seems to have a dread of isolation--not because he cannot bear his own thoughts, but because isolationism creates an insidious form of inertia. We make no effort to meet people half-way. "It costs no inward struggle not to go," he says in "Storm Fear."⁶ Finally, after going our way alone for a time we lose the ability altogether of contacting others. Then comes mental derangement from which we cannot recover without help.

"And my heart owns a doubt
Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
And save ourselves unaided." 6

A striking example of the effect of isolation from people is Len's wife in "A Servant to Servants."⁷ Although she is not physically isolated she is spiritually remote from her husband and the other people in the house because of lack of understanding and lack of common purpose. She feels that there is no one with whom she can sit down and think out loud as one can with a friend. While she is working with her hands, her mind naturally turns inwardly on itself. Consequently, she becomes a borderline case. She says to her caller:

6. A BOY'S WILL: Storm Fear p. 19

7. NORTH OF BOSTON: A Servant to Servants. p. 64

"It seems to me I can't express my feelings any more
Than I can raise my voice or want to lift my hand---

.
It's got so I don't even know for sure
Whether I am glad, sorry or anything.
There's nothing but a voice-like left inside
That seems to tell how I ought to feel, 7
And would feel if I wasn't all gone wrong."

The fact that she can sit down and talk to a stranger as she does is indicative of her need of communion with other human beings. So eager is she for normal human contact that, at the risk of getting behind in her work, she pathetically begs her caller to stay longer.

The theme of friendliness and the need of being close to people is as equally well expressed in "The Tuft of Flowers,"⁸ as in "Mending Wall." Frost believes--paradoxical as it may seem--that there is a kinship between people whether they are together or apart. Two people working together with the same purpose in mind may be many miles apart, yet they are drawn together in spirit by this common bond. Were it not for this inter-relationship, the whole cosmic scheme would disintegrate. Human beings need each other, for none can go his way alone and live fully. When the poet goes to spread the new-mown hay after the mower, he cannot see the man who has mowed the grass. After the latter has finished mowing, he has probably gone off about some of the other endless tasks which seem never to get done

7. Ibid: p. 64

8. A BOY'S WILL: The Tuft of Flowers: page 47

on a small farm. So the poet feels very much isolated.

"But he had gone his way, the grass all mown, 8
And I must be, as he had been,--alone."

Soon a butterfly bewilderedly flying by discovers a tall tuft of butterfly weed by a brook, which the mower's scythe has spared. The poet realizes that the mower did not cut the flowers simply because he had enjoyed their beauty as they had glistened in the morning dew. As this realization comes to the poet, who would have done the same thing himself, he no longer feels alone although there is no one else in the hay-field. Because another person has shared his thought, everything takes on a new significance. Now he feels as if he, too, had been out in the field when the mower was there at dawn. Because he has recognized a spirit kindred to his own, he has a feeling of well being and he no longer feels lonely. Consequently, he works easily and contentedly just as if the other man were helping him. Even at noon when he is resting alone in the shade, he feels as if he were talking

"With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.

'Men work together,' I told him from the heart,
'Whether they work together or apart.' 9

The fact that the poet becomes happy as soon as he realizes someone works with him is proof of the need of companionship.

8. Ibid: page 47

9. Ibid: page 49

Therefore, people need to cultivate each other. Those who choose to go their way alone may succeed for a while, but eventually a day of reckoning will come when they will pay for their choice by being so bitterly lonely that their own activities scare them. An example is the old man living by himself on one of the deserted New England farms of which Frost writes so realistically. As the man, holding a lighted lamp, clomps from room to room of his empty house, he succeeds only in creating an atmosphere of scariness. The sound of his steps in the empty house is like the sound of beating on an empty box. In contrast to this weird noise, the out-door night sounds, "the roar of trees and crack of branches," are wholesome and heartening. He has gone into a room, but with the forgetfulness of age, he cannot remember what he is looking for.

"A light he was to no one but himself"¹⁰ because he is alone. There is no one whom he can help or who can help him. The result? His mind has been so concerned with himself that he is now losing his memory. "An Old Man's Winter Night" is a symbol of the tragedy of lonely, forsaken, un-cared-for old age.

"One aged man--one man--can't keep a house,
A farm, a countryside, or if he can,¹¹
It's thus he does it of a winter night."

10. MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: An Old Man's Winter Night: p. 15
11. Ibid: p. 16

And so he sleeps, disturbed, never by human sounds but, by the log shifting in the stove.

Likewise, the gaunt, grim figure of a man standing alone in the doorway of his isolated cabin watching the train speed by is a symbol of utter loneliness. On the level mountain top stands his lonely cabin surrounded for miles and miles only by scrub oak. No near neighbor, no one to laugh with or at him, no one with whom to share experiences, and no one to work for.

"The miles and miles he lived from anywhere were evidently something he could bear," says the poet as if he himself could not.¹²

The man's physical needs are apparently cared for, because the narrator, from the train window can see some hens, a pig, a garden, a well, and the oaks for fuel. But what about entertainment? The narrator says:

"That I assume was what our passing train meant."¹²

Nothing to look forward to all day but the passing of a train. No laughter, no singing, no scolding even!

As "An Old Man's Winter Night" and "The Figure in the Doorway" create an atmosphere of loneliness, so does "The Cocoon".¹³ All that the little house standing in the elm-tree meadow gives forth into the autumn haze is the blue

12. A FURTHER RANGE TAKEN DOUBLY: The Figure in the Doorway. p. 40

13. WEST-RUNNING BROOK: The Cocoon. p. 12

smoke from its one chimney. For hours no one has stepped outdoors or indoors. Its windows, unlighted, though it is now dark, do not extend an air of friendliness and welcome to the outside world. The poet suggests that the people in the house are so exclusive that they are unconsciously, but surely, building themselves a cocoon. Eventually, they will become so wrapped in their own concerns that no one will notice them any more than they themselves will notice anyone. A pathetic forshadowing of the future.

All these examples show the need of sharing life--physically and spiritually--with others. Grief, loss, and death are made bearable only by the knowledge that people are willing to help us. Likewise, happy experiences, jokes, fun and work are significant only if shared with someone who understands and cares. No matter what Robert Frost is doing he likes to do it with someone. "The Pasture", the first poem of his second volume of poetry, North of Boston, is an invitation to share an experience. Simply written in the speech rhythm of the speaker, these few lines reveal tenderness, love of people, and a desire to be with them.

"I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear I may):
I shan't be gone long.---You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young,
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I shan't be gone long.--You come too." 14

Robert Frost believes that it is this closeness to people that makes life bearable. Fellowship and communion with others healthily lifts us out of ourselves. The result is that by sharing another's load, our own has been made lighter.

Chapter II

Understanding of Women

Since Frost is primarily concerned with the New England scene, the women which he describes in his poems are New England women: house-wives, house-keepers, mothers. All are over-worked, serious, humble, self-contained, and, for the most part, uncomplaining. Too far from the city and its influences, they lack the sophistication and glamor of the city-bred women. On their bouldered hill-side farms, isolated and solitary, they toil through the hot summer and battle the weather through the cold winter. Theirs is a hard, discouraging, and often futile lot. Because he is so keenly interested in human beings, Frost with keen insight into their bleak grim lives treats them with understanding and warm human sympathy.

The most striking example of this over-burdened and neglected woman in Frost's poetry is Len's wife who represents the yearning of a woman trapped by endless drudgery and the futility of work that gets one nowhere.¹ The author makes this woman a real, living character by having her tell her own story in halting, broken, interrupted sentences which

1. NORTH OF BOSTON: A Servant to Servants: p. 64

give the effect of the speaker thinking things through:

"And see the way you lived, but I don't know!
 With a houseful of hungry men to feed
 I guess you'd find...It seems to me
 I can't express my feelings any more." 2

Len's wife is not complaining or whining about herself; she is simply stating facts as they are. And the facts are grim enough. Neither does she denounce the circumstances which have made her what she is nor does she denounce or blame any person. In fact, her attitude is almost too gentle and humble. One feels if she sputtered and fussed she would be better off. By doing so, she could, at least, make her husband notice her! Instead she goes on uncomplainingly and quietly. When she finds a sympathetic listener, however, she tells her story without bitterness or rancor.

As she talks she reveals that a brother of her father's who had been insane had been kept at home and her mother had to care for him. The insane man was so violent that a cage was still in the house, a grim reminder of tragedy. Len's wife, as a little girl, although, mercifully, she had never seen its occupant, had seen the cage and had been brought up on the story connected with it. Now, grown to womanhood, while her hands are mechanically occupied she broods on the story and the possibilities for herself:

"I have my fancies: it runs in the family." 3

2. Ibid: p. 64

3. Ibid: p. 67

She admits that she has already been a patient in the State Asylum and may have to go again. Instead of looking forward to the future with hope and courage and faith, she is afraid. After she was married she was too timid to suggest to Len that they move.

"I didn't want the blame if things went wrong."⁴

For a while she had been contented in her new home, but as she says, "the change wore out like a prescription."⁵

She had enjoyed the view from her kitchen window and had enjoyed living near a lake for a while. Now the sameness is getting on her nerves. She longs to get away from it but is, again, too timid to suggest to Len that he take her away because she doesn't want to be held responsible if they are not successful. She wants a change but hasn't the courage to instigate it. Consequently, she is in a "rut" in which she is surely heading for disaster.

Although she has worked so steadily and quietly that her husband and the hired men do not even notice her, she is all the time sensitive to their casual attitude toward her. While she is cooking, the hired men have sprawled around the kitchen no more concerned about what they say and do than if a woman weren't in their presence. She resents their indifference, yet she is too timid--or too indifferent toward them--to censure them or to ask her husband to censure them--as she should have done.

4. Ibid: p. 70

5. Ibid: p. 71

She resents the men's treating her like a piece of furniture, yet she is equally remiss in her attitude toward them. She admits she doesn't bother even to learn their names much less their characters or whether they're safe to have in the house. She is so indifferent that she does not even feel afraid of them. The reason for this is that she is so tired that she doesn't care what happens to her.

She knows that medicine won't help her and that she should have a rest from doing the same things over and over, but she thinks that there is no other way. She does think that she would like to live out on the ground as the summer campers do. Yet she is afraid to try even such a simple expedient.

6 "I haven't the courage for a risk like that," she says.

Suppose it should rain? Suppose a high wind should come up and snatch the tent away? Always apprehensive of failure.

Over-worked and tired as she is, she is appreciative of her beautiful surroundings. Speaking of the lake she says:

"You take the lake. I look at it.
I see it's a fair, pretty sheet of water
.....
It took my mind off doughnuts and soda biscuit
To step outdoors and take the water dazzle
A sunny morning,---" 7

6. Ibid. p. 71.

7. Ibid. p. 70.

This appreciation of natural beauty, if not of the people in her house, is one note of hope. As she stands and looks at the lake, she makes herself repeat out loud that it is beautiful.

Yet she feels hopeless and helpless about herself. Her monotonous life has made her an automaton in both motion and emotion. Frustrated and longing for the unfulfilled, she is making the best of a bad situation which she feels powerless to change.

"I 'spose I've got to go the road I'm going:
Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I?" 8

As the listener is about to leave, the narrator says:

"Bless you, of course, you're keeping me from work,
But the thing of it is, I need to be kept.---
I'd rather you'd not go unless you must." 9

On this note the poem, which is like the case-history of a psychopathic patient, ends. Len's wife must accept her fate and take in her stride the mental breakdown which she knows will come.

As the poet makes Len's wife a real living character by having her tell her own story in the speech rhythm of the speaker, so does he make Estelle¹⁰ a real person by having her mother tell the girl's story in ordinary conversational tone.

Just as Len's wife is uncomplaining and self-contained so is Estelle. Proud and quiet, for fifteen years, to pay her own

8. Ibid. p. 71

9. Ibid. p. 72

10. Ibid. The Housekeeper: p. 97.

and her mother's board, she has kept house for a man with whom, weakly, she has allowed herself to drift into the easy relationship that often happens in isolated country districts. The result is that remorse eventually sets in because she did what she had probably considered at the time nobody's business but her own in that lonely out-of-the-way place.

"The strain's been too much for her all these years:
I can't explain it any other way," the old lady offers. 11

Estelle has conscientiously and painstakingly worked in-doors and outdoors for John. She takes such pride in raising hens that John wins prizes for them at the fair:

"She wants our hens to be the best there are." 11

By working like this and not getting any money, she is really taking care of John. Because of what she has allowed to happen she is helpless. There is nothing to do but go on and on from year to year, a victim of circumstances, in a situation which eventually becomes intolerable.

Finally, desperate and worn-out from her thankless and seemingly endless toil, and frustrated in her yearning for the honor John has denied her, Estelle gets up enough courage to run away to a man who is willing to give her his name.

"She thinks if it was bad to live with him,
It must be right to leave him," concludes the old 11
lady as Estelle, at last, comes into her own.

11. Ibid. p. 101

Both Len's wife and Estelle are vivid portraits of a narrow, unrelieved life on a remote farm where each day brings the same wearisome round of seemingly useless tasks, the same sense of discouragement and futility. Their lives have become so starved and cramped that they have nothing to look back on with pride or look forward to with hope. The woman in "The Hill Wife"¹² like Len's wife is another example of how loneliness can warp a human being. She has become so lonely that the seasonal coming and going of the birds has come to be much more significant to her than need be. She realizes that there should be so many human beings in her life that she need not count on the birds to fill her starved heart.

"One ought not to have to care
 So much as you and I
 Care when the birds come round the house
 To seem to say good-bye;

Or care so much when they come back

.
 The truth being we are as much
 Too glad for the one thing

As we are too sad for the other here---"¹³

Although she looks forward so eagerly and happily to the coming of the birds, she realizes with a pang that they are sufficient unto themselves. They do not need her.

"---birds that fill their breasts
 But with each other and themselves
 And their----nests." ¹⁴

12. MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: The Hill Wife. p. 49

13. Ibid. p. 49

14. Ibid. p. 50

After all her hopes and expectations, she realizes she is a mere spectator because the birds are indifferent to her. What she needs is people on whom to lavish her affections.

In her bleak loneliness she becomes afraid even of the house which is her home. When she and her husband return late at night she is so nervous about the darkness and the terrible silence that they rattle the key noisily in the lock as if they were warning someone or something inside to go out through the other door. Then they leave the door wide open until they light the lamp inside.¹⁵

As her horizon gradually narrows, little things that normally go unnoticed upset her. The scratching of the branches of the pine-tree on her bed-room window causes her to have bad dreams. Consequently, the harmless pine-tree becomes, to her fervid imagination, a sinister and fear-inspiring object.¹⁵

Since the house is small and there are only two of them, she does not have enough to do to occupy all her time. The result is that she thinks about herself and her utter loneliness. Eventually, the victim of this limited, barren environment, she becomes mentally unbalanced. Not until she is past help does her husband realize that there are losses on this side, too, of "the grave".¹⁶

Although "The Hill Wife" is a lyric, it has the speech

15. Ibid. p. 51.

16. Ibid. p. 52.

quality of "A Servant to Servants" and "The Housekeeper."

The story is told by the woman and the comments are made by the poet. As in the long narrative poems, the speech tones again cause the character to stand out clearly.

Somewhat akin to "The Housekeeper" is "The Fear" which gives a picture of a woman who has left one man and gone to live with another. As Estelle's character emerges in the vivid dialogue between her mother and a neighbor, the character of the woman in "The Fear" comes to the surface through the realistic conversation between her and Joel and between her and the stranger in the dark.

This woman's fear is fear of the man whom she has left. And so much has it poisoned her mind that, like the Hill Wife, she has begun to imagine things:

"I always have felt strange when we came home
 To the dark house after so long an absence,
 And the key rattled loudly into place
 Seemed to warn someone to be getting out
 At one door as we entered at another.
 What if I'm right, and someone all the time--'" 17

The cause of the upheaval in her mind now is that while she and Joel are coming home after dark, the dash-board light reveals to her a face in the bushes along the roadside. It is only a passing glimpse, but the woman cannot enter the house without knowing if her husband is lurking around and spying on her and Joel. Why should she think he is? Perhaps it is

the workings of a troubled conscience. In any case, she is determined, though almost paralyzed with terror, to find out if it is really he:

"Let him get off and he'll be everywhere
Around us, looking out of trees and bushes
Till I sha'n't dare to set a foot outdoors.
And I can't stand it.'" 18

Besides fearing her husband, she doesn't trust Joel: she is afraid that he will think she and her husband are meeting secretly. Yet her troubled conscience and her distrust give her a sort of desperate courage which forces her to face the situation and clear it up once and for all to the satisfaction of both men. So she takes the lantern, and telling Joel to stay behind she goes forth alone to meet whomever or whatever she has to meet, because she can't endure the suspense.

"I can't go in,
I can't, and leave a thing like that unsettled. 19
Doors locked and curtains drawn will make no difference."

Going across the grass toward the road she cries,
"What do you want?" 20

Through the night from a short distance down the road comes the answer:

"Nothing---You seem afraid.

I'll
just come forward in the lantern light
And let you see.'" 21

The woman's body sways in terror as she listens to the footsteps coming up the road in the darkness. When the man

- 18. Ibid. pp. 113-114
- 19. Ibid. p. 112
- 20. Ibid. p. 115
- 21. Ibid. p. 117

is within radius of the lantern light, she sees it is not her husband, but a man who explains he has just come out for a walk.

As over-powering as her terror has been, her relief is almost more so. She stammers:

"'But if that's all---Joel---
 You realize--- 21
 You won't think anything? You understand?'"

Then realizing she has revealed her real fear, that Joel would think she and her husband were meeting by arrangement, she hastily changes to another key:

"'You understand that we have to be careful.
 This is a very, very, lonely place. 22
 Joel! She spoke as if she couldn't turn.'"

The lantern slips from her nerveless hands, clatters to the ground, and the light goes out. What has happened? She has fainted from sheer relief.

Like Len's wife, like Estelle, and like the Hill Wife, this woman is living on a remote farm. In less isolated surroundings, a passer-by in the dark would not have unnerved her. Her own words indicate the loneliness:

"'You speak as if this were a travelled road.
 You forget where we are. What is beyond
 That he'd be going to or coming from 23
 At such an hour of night, and on foot too?'"

As her fear and apprehension arise out of loneliness, so does Amy's uncontrollable grief in "Home Burial" ²⁴ in which Frost depicts with tragic poignancy the conflict between a

- 21. Ibid. p. 117
- 22. Ibid. p. 117
- 23. Ibid. p. 112
- 24. Ibid: Home Burial p. 43.

man's and a woman's way of bearing loss. Perhaps if the little graveyard were not so near the house that every time she looked out the landing window she could see the mound that was the baby's grave, Amy might be better able to adjust herself to her loss. She is so overwhelmed by grief that she is incapable of sublimating it by turning her thoughts into other channels. In fact, she aggravates it by continually looking at the grave. Finally she becomes so absorbed in death rather than life that she resents her husband's trying to adjust himself to normal living and accuses him of brutal insensitivity because he does not indulge in grief as she does:

"If you had any feelings, you that dug
 With your own hand--how could you?--his little grave;
 I saw you from that very window there,
 Making the gravel leap and leap in air,

.
 I thought, Who is that Man?

I didn't know you.

And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
 To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.
 Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice

.
 --I went near to see with my own eyes.
 You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
 Of fresh earth from your own baby's grave
 And talk about your everyday concerns.
 You had stood the spade up against the wall
 Outside there in the entry, for I saw it."

.
 "'I can repeat the very words you were saying.
 'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
 Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'
 Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
 What had how long it takes a birch to rot
 To do with what was in the darkened parlour.
 You couldn't care.'" 25

The result is that her harbored resentment has made her abnormal. Thinking her husband does not understand her, she leaves him and goes to someone who she thinks will sympathize.

Although these women painted by Frost are somewhat mentally warped and twisted because they are unable to express themselves satisfactorily, two others stand out as wholesome, normal human beings who solve the problems of their lives realistically and sanely. They, too, are farm women smothered in hay in summer and in snow in winter--figuratively speaking. They work hard; they argue with their husbands, invariably getting in that all important last word. (Perhaps that is why they are so well adjusted: they are not afraid to talk back!) Furthermore, they have a sense of humor which takes the sting out of difficulties and prevents them from becoming victims of their environments.

26

One of these is Mary, in "The Death of the Hired Man". Because of her gentleness and sympathy she stands out as a memorable character among Frost's women. In contrast to Len's wife she is healthily absorbed in another person's problems. Mary's attitude toward Silas, a poor old shiftless ne'er-do-well, shows that she is tender and kind. When she finds him sick and helpless, she takes him into the house and makes him as comfortable as she can, even though, once upon a time, in his

"palmy days", Silas, quite simply and unperturbedly, "had walked out" on Mary and her husband in the middle of haying.

Although she knows how shiftless Silas has been, she insists that saving his self-respect is much more important than getting the hay into the barn. Of as little worth as his life may have been, it is at least worth-while, to her, not to hurt his feelings. Silas has only one life to live--useless as it may have been; the haying occurs every summer.

Mary does not censure Silas's brother and his family for giving their shiftless relative the cold shoulder:

"'Silas is what he is--we wouldn't mind him-- 27
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.'"

By her gentle pity and patient understanding, Mary dominates her husband's will. It is all very well to be as practical-minded as Warren, but Mary, typically feminine, insists that human values come first. Gradually Warren relents as he listens to his wife's patient arguments. When she realizes she has won him to her side she warns:

"'But Warren, please remember how it is
He's come to help you ditch the meadow.---
You mustn't laugh at him!'" 28

All the time Mary is talking she is trailing her fingers in and out among the morning glory vines on the porch. The flowers are a woman's concession to beauty in a utilitarian atmosphere.
29

- 27. Ibid. p. 21
- 28. Ibid. p. 28
- 29. Ibid. p. 29

After meeting Len's wife, Estelle, and the Hill Wife, Mary is like a glow of warm sunshine.

Like Mary, Helen Cole stands out as a well integrated personality because of her kindness and understanding. Her quick response to her husband's teasing thrusts proves that she has a sense of humor. Her protecting maternal instinct reveals itself in her concern for Brother Meserve although she thoroughly dislikes the man.

"I detest the thought of him
With his ten children under ten years old." 30

Yet she begs him to stay:

"Won't you to please me? Please!
If I say please?" 31

Like all sincere people, Helen is annoyed with show-offs who take unnecessary and dangerous risks. Brother Meserve is not in the least heroic in her steady eyes.

³²
"Such a trouble!" She exclaims in exasperation.

Then she "jumps" on her husband who enjoys teasing her. She is impatient with him for admiring the cock-sure little preacher.

"I don't like what he is doing, which is what
You like, and like him for," she accuses. 33

Later, after Meserve has been away long enough to reach home, his wife anxiously calls the Coles to inquire about her absent husband. Helen, in remorse, exclaims:

30. MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: Snow p. 76.

31. Ibid. p. 81

32. Ibid. p. 82

33. Ibid. p. 93

"'Why did I ever let him leave this house!'" 33

When her husband teasingly accuses her of not having been quite able to hide the wish that Meserve show the spunk to go, Helen explodes:

"'Fred, after all I said! You shan't make it out That it was any way but what it was.'" 33

At the same time, with feminine curiosity she asks:

"'Did she let on by any word she said She didn't thank me?'" 33

When Fred reports that Mrs. Meserve asked "Like a threat ---her voice scraping low"³⁴ why they had let her husband go, Helen, justly wrathful, exclaims:

"'Asked why we let him? You let me there. I'll ask her why she let him.'" 34

Yet when Mrs. Meserve does not answer the telephone, Helen is greatly troubled. Because she can hear a clock ticking, she knows the other woman has gone off and left the receiver hanging. Who would leave the receiver off the hook except a person who had been frightened off by something or a person greatly disturbed? Then Helen hears a baby crying "Muffled and far off."³⁵

"'Its mother wouldn't let it cry like that Not if she's there,'" says Helen anxiously.³⁵

Feeling utterly helpless because it is a dark stormy night, feeling that she herself is to blame for letting

33. Ibid. p. 93

34. Ibid. pp. 93-94

35. Ibid. p. 94

Brother Meserve go out on such a night, and feeling abused for being routed out of bed, Helen sits down with Fred to await daylight. Finally, Meserve telephones he is safe. Helen, hearing the news, experiences a revulsion of feeling and exclaims reasonably, if somewhat crossly:

"Well
 She has him then, though what she wants him for
 I don't see.'" 36

One cannot imagine Helen's being overcome by life as Len's wife is. Nor would she allow herself to be imposed upon as Estelle does. Neither would she be like Amy--unable to rise above grief. Instead, Helen Cole will go on with clear vision and imagination, always the master of her fate or else---!

Thus Robert Frost depicts New England farm womanhood. There is nothing sensational about these people; they do not get their names in the paper because of any spectacular events in their lives nor do they get their pictures in the roto-gravure section. Yet they emerge in the poems as real, touching, and knowable human beings pitifully accepting the inescapable, and painted tenderly, understandingly, and sympathetically by a master painter.

Chapter III

Robert Frost's Men

With the characteristic charity and sentiment with which he deals with human nature, Robert Frost paints a man whom he knows intimately: the New England farmer. The poet has many times thrown down his hoe to chat with the neighboring farmers as they have passed by his place. He has helped his next-door neighbor mend the stone wall which divides their properties. He himself has cut hay, milked cows, gathered apples, and done all the things which he describes his men as doing. Consequently, the poet has first hand information on his subject. As the other farmers have experienced disappointment and discouragement in their attempts to wrest a livelihood from the stubborn soil, he has experienced it. The result in the poet's work is sincerity.

Close to nature, the Yankee farmer is simple, slow, laconic, and hard-working, expecting adversity and accepting it with calm stoicism because life is like that. Drought or hail or rain he accepts them all with a stolidity born of patience and great powers of endurance. An ordinary human being, he does ordinary human things without any questioning or much philosophizing. Through the blazing furnace of experience he has learned that life is indeed a bed of stubble to which he

can adjust himself comfortably only by adroit manipulation. Then he accepts it, for the most part, for what it is without whining or complaining. Once he puts his hand to the plow there is no turning back because "the best way out is always through."¹ On the whole, the man depicted by Frost seems much better able to cope with life than his mate who has allowed her environment to overwhelm her.

A representative of the philosophy of going through is ¹Len who, his wife says, "looks on the bright side of everything." Seen through the eyes of his maladjusted wife, Len appears as a slow-spoken, hard-working, and easy-going man. He does indeed look on the bright side of everything. There is nothing wrong with his wife that medicine won't cure--he thinks. It isn't that he is cruel or consciously inconsiderate; he is just maddeningly obtuse. His bewildered wife leniently says:

"It's not that Len don't want the best for me."¹

Absorbed in his own out-door work which satisfies him thoroughly, it does not occur to him that his wife might be thoroughly disgusted with hers. But it will take a big jolt to make Len realize that his wife needs more than medicine. Some day she will collapse, not only physically but mentally. Then when she is no longer there to cook his meals and keep

1. NORTH OF BOSTON: A Servant to Servants. p. 66.

the house in order, he will perhaps understand that encouragement, affection, and companionship are more necessary than a smoothly run farm.

Besides working on his farm, Len's "into everything in town." Therefore, he is interested in the welfare of others. As to that, however, one might say: "Charity begins at home."

As conscientious a worker as Len is, his wife says he allows his men to take advantage of him because he is somewhat easy going.

"'---he's got too many men
 - Around him to look after that make waste.
 They take advantage of him shamefully, 2
 And proud, too, of themselves for doing so.'"

Furthermore, he lets the men do or say what they please in his wife's presence. Even if she seems unperturbed by them, Len should discern--as a man with perception would--that they distress her. By allowing such a condition to exist he lets the men see that he is unconcerned in his attitude toward his wife. Thus he is putting himself on a par with them in lack of common ordinary decency.

But Len believing that the best way out is always through will probably always make the best of what comes, even his wife's eventual mental collapse. In New England parlance: he will always get along.

In contrast to Len in his attitude toward his wife, is Amy's husband who begs his wife to talk to him and who pathetically

tries to see his wife's side of the argument:

"Amy! Don't go to someone else this time.

· · · · ·
Tell me about it if it's something human.
Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there
Apart would make me out.
Give me a chance.'" 3

He is concerned enough about Amy to ask from the foot of the stairs as he sees her look back over her shoulder:

"What is it you see from there always--for I want to know.'" 4

When he sees her numb look of despair as she cowers on the stair step instead of answering, he goes to the window. He looks a long time, however, before he sees.

"She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
Blind creature; and a while he didn't see.
But at last he murmured, 'Oh,' and again, 'Oh'." 4

Amazed at his own blindness, he continues:

"The wonder is I didn't see at once.
I never noticed it from here before.
I must be wonted to it--that's the reason.'" 5

What the man wonders at not having seen before and admits he is "wonted to" is the sight, through the upstairs window, of their baby's grave.

Amy's husband has been gradually adjusting himself to his loss by taking an interest in other things. At first, he may have simulated an interest, but as the days have gone by, he has found he can endure what cannot be cured.

3. Ibid. Home Burial. P. 45.

4. Ibid. p. 43.

5. Ibid. p. 44.

Furthermore, he has probably discovered that time is a healer. His ability to sublimate his grief by being healthily concerned with life rather than death does not, however, indicate that Amy's husband wants to forget the baby, for he says bewilderedly:

6

"'Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?'"

He, rightfully, feels he is being be-littled and ignored because Amy acts as if her whole world had crashed about her ears. He is still there, and he wants to be close to her to help her over this trying time. At the same time he is honestly and justly annoyed with her for aggravating her grief by continually looking out the window at the grave and by doing nothing to take her mind off herself:

"'I do think, though, you overdo it a little,

 To take your mother loss of a first child
 So inconsolably--in the face of love.'" 7

When she then accuses him of sneering, he reaches the limit of his endurance and impatiently exclaims:

8

"'God. What a woman!'"

He is trying to understand her, and he has shown his willingness to share her grief, but she has lost her sense of values to such an extent that she turns a deaf ear to his pleadings and repels his advances. He is a picture of pathetic

- 6. Ibid. p. 45
- 7. Ibid. p. 46
- 8. Ibid. p. 47

bewilderment and confusion as he realizes he is always saying the wrong thing to Amy:

"'A man must partly give up being a man
With women folk. We could have some arrangement
By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off
Anything special you're a-mind to name.'" 9

Conscious that a man's way is different from a woman's way, he is at a loss. He yearns to help Amy but doesn't know how.

"'But I might be taught.'" ⁹ he pleads.

Amy's husband is not callous or hard because he is facing his grief sanely and realistically. He is getting over his trouble by believing and going on, and, as trouble always does, it is evoking the latent strength in him which enables him to live without melancholy or self-pity.

Very much different from Len and Amy's husband is John whose character is vividly set forth in a dialogue between Estelle's mother and a neighbor. John embodies all the characteristics one man should not have and live. Eventually he does get his "come uppance", but, unfortunately, not before another's reputation is sacrificed to his selfishness.

John, with whom Estelle has lived for fifteen years, takes her so much for granted that he does not bother to marry her. When anyone has suggested marriage to him,

"He'd say, 'Why should they?' No more words
 than that" or
 "Better than married ought to be as good
 As married---" 10

Even when Estelle's mother has wanted them to get married,
 she says John has brutally and complacently suggested that

11

"'I was too old to have grandchildren.'"

What Estelle wants or feels or needs is not important.
 As long as John gets his own way it is immaterial to him who
 gets hurt. He is definitely operating on the theory that it
 is a man's world.

With almost incredible matter-of-factness and selfishness
 John allows Estelle to do not only all the house-work but half
 the out-door work. This she does--John says--because she likes
 it. Like it or not, Estelle does it because someone has to.
 John won't.

12

"John's a bad farmer," says the old lady.

Because of Estelle's industry, her mother says:

"Our hens and cows and pigs are always better
 Than folks like us have any business with." 13

Consequently, it is Estelle who supports John.

14

"One thing you can't help liking about John,
 He's fond of nice things--too fond, some would say."

Yes, he is "too fond"; so fond that he has no scruples
 about imposing on a defenseless woman to get them.

As for achieving anything on "his own" he is entirely

10. Ibid: The Housekeeper. p. 102.

11. Ibid. p. 107

12. Ibid. p. 103

13. Ibid. pp. 103-104

14. Ibid. p. 109

incapable of it. He has mortgaged his farm which he has allowed to run down. He lets his new-mown hay get rained on three times. Instead of unhitching the mare after he has come home, he carelessly turns her "out to pasture, rig and all."¹⁵ Before, she can go far, however, the wagon will, of course, get caught in something. The wheels could be broken and the mare could be injured, but John, inefficient as he is, can't foresee that.

Although Estelle works hard to raise prize hens, John never sells them. He figures if they are worth all the money offered for them, they are worth as much to keep. Consequently, the farm is all expense.

The old lady's statement, "he is kinder than the run of men",¹³ is a terrible indictment of the men she has known. Why does she say he is kinder than some men? Because he wouldn't hurt one of his prize hens!

"You don't know what a gentle lot we are:
We wouldn't hurt a hen! You ought to see us
Moving a flock of hens from place to place.
We're not allowed to take them upside down,
All we can hold together by the legs.
Two at a time's the rule, one on each arm,
No matter how far and how many times
We have to go.

And we live up to it; or I don't know¹⁶
What childishness he wouldn't give way to."

And to cap it all,

- 15. Ibid. p. 102
- 13. Ibid. p. 103
- 16. Ibid. p. 104

"He manages to keep the upper hand
On his own farm. He's boss."¹⁷ He would be!

But a day of reckoning comes. Estelle leaves. John, the highhanded boss who has been incapable of making his farm pay for itself, is so confused and bewildered he is helpless. For once, things are not going his way. Unable to understand that a woman too can reach a limit of endurance, he angrily pities himself. (Estelle had fifteen years during which to pity herself, but that is beside the point.) He struggles ineffectually with half-cooked meals and neglects his farm even more than usual. In a fit of temper, he childishly hurls the hoe high into the air. It lands in an apple-tree where it remains! Thus John begins to pay for his hitherto selfishly indulgent life.

"'You dreadful fool,'" ¹⁷ Estelle's mother hurls at him as he shuts the door. So he is--and more.

Warren, too, like Len and John is a New England farmer. His character however is different from Len's and, it is to be hoped, from John's. It is amusing to see Warren, exasperated and impatient, struggling between kindness and prudence. In his attempts at justifying himself he is thoroughly human and thoroughly masculine. Yet Warren is within his rights in wanting someone on whom he can depend. It is a grave situation for a farmer when the hired help "walk out on him" leaving a meadowful of hay to be mown or, more important yet, hay that is

17. Ibid. p. 110

already mown, for a rain storm can ruin it. Consequently when Mary reports that Silas is back, Warren at the end of his patience explodes:

"I'll not have the fellow back.---
 What good is he? Who else will harbor him---

 What help he is there's no depending on.
 Off he goes always when I need him most.'" 18

Warren is not unkind or hard; he is merely practical and farsighted because he cannot take chances on losing his hay. Already he has had experiences with the exasperating Silas who independently "breezes in and out" when and how he pleases.

Mary has to be subtle with Warren who himself is about as subtle as a steam-roller! While Mary is carefully speaking in a low voice so Silas won't hear and be hurt, Warren shouts,
 18
 "'I'm done.'" 18

"'Sh! not so loud: he'll hear you,'" cautions Mary.
 "'I want him to: he'll have to soon or late.'" 18
 yells Warren.

Poor Silas!

After Warren, whose mental processes are somewhat sluggish--especially when he, man-like, chooses not to understand--gets it through his head that Mary means to keep Silas with them, he asks:

"'Silas has better claim on us you think
 Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles
 As the road winds would bring him to his door.
 Silas has walked that far no doubt to-day.
 Why didn't he go there? His brother's rich,
 A somebody--director in the bank.'" 19

18. Ibid. The Death of the Hired Man. p. 14.

19. Ibid. p. 19

Warren's question is perfectly fair. After all, he and Mary are not under any obligation to Silas.

Mary's and Warren's sparring and the man's final capitulation to the woman's gentle persuasion are laughable. With much urging and coaxing and philosophizing, the woman subtly brings the man around to her way of thinking.

After Warren is finally convinced that Mary's way is the better, he goes in to speak to Silas. Almost immediately, he comes back and slipping gently to Mary's side, catches her hand and holds it tightly as if to prepare her and to restore his own self-possession. The man who a few minutes before had been sputtering impatiently is now so overcome that he cannot utter a word. When he at last finds his voice, all he utters²⁰ is the stark monosyllable: "'Dead!'"

The fact that Silas felt free to come to Warren and Mary when he was not well although he had treated them shabbily speaks volumes for them--their kindness, their generosity, and their forgiveness.

Unlike them all: silent Len, brutal John, and kind-hearted practical Warren, is garrulous Brother Meserve, a cocky, insincere, sanctimoniously conceited little runt of a Racker Sect preacher who insists on going out in a snow-storm unnecessarily just to show that "he can take it." Selfishly, he does what he wants to when he wants to; it doesn't matter

that his anxious wife begs him to remain where he is for the night. Neither does it matter to him that he has aroused Helen and Fred Cole out of their warm bed on a cold winter night and is keeping them up while he gets warm and his horses are resting. If he would only make up his mind to stay all night they could all go to bed. Instead almost all night Helen and Fred have to listen to his inconsequential chatter.

"'That sort of man,' says Fred later, 'talks straight on all his life
From the last thing he said himself, stone deaf
To anything anyone may say.'" 21

It seems that talking is the thing Brother Meserve does best.

When Helen asks him what his wife said on the telephone, Brother Meserve rudely changes the subject instead of answering.

"'It's quiet as an empty church without him,'" says Fred Cole after Brother Meserve has departed. This is one man's characterization of another.

Hours later, after Meserve has telephoned that he has arrived home safely, Helen Cole gives a woman's characterization of him:

"'Well, she (his wife) has him then, though what she wants him for I don't see.'" 23 Neither does anyone else!

So far, Robert Frost's men have been represented for the most part by the Yankee farmer. Next to be considered is the

21. MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: Snow. p. 80.

22. Ibid. p. 91.

23. Ibid. p. 97.

farmer's hired man. On the New England farms the hired help are the chosen people of all hired help. To keep in their good graces, the employers have to pamper and humor and cajole. Threats and advice are of no avail except as definite instigators of further trouble. The role of master and servant is entirely reversed on the New England farm. Where ordinarily a servant might cringe and boot-lick, in this instance, the master does all the cringing and boot-licking. If the hired man feels like packing up and departing for richer pasture, he does so regardless of unraked hay, unhoed potatoes, or unweeded gardens. Despite the fact that they are sometimes shiftless, sometimes ignorant, and at all times a law unto themselves, they insist that, come what may, their code be observed by all comers--albeit a selfish code.

An example of this colossal independence is Silas who calmly "walks out" leaving Warren alone in the middle of haying and just as calmly "walks in" again when he is sick and helpless and has no place to go. Shiftless as he is Silas is concerned only with earning just enough money to keep himself in tobacco. He feels that by doing this, he is preserving his own dignity and self-respect. Being under obligation to anyone for tobacco is apparently a direct violation of his sacred code. It is not beneath his dignity, however, nor is he in the least embarrassed, to return to Marv and Warren when he is helpless, although he left them at a critical time. He is too proud to go to his

well-to-do brother, but he does not hesitate to impose on Helen's and Warren's kindness when he is so desperate he does not know where to go.

Silas, whose only skill is in building a load of hay, belittles education as all people who feel inferior do. Silas, however, to cover up his own inadequacies says if he can teach Harold Wilson, a young college boy, to build a load of hay, Harold will be of some use in the world. Silas's ability to do the same did not do much for him except to buy tobacco. His theory is that books make fools of people. He cannot understand that Harold studies Latin because he likes it. "That an argument!"²⁴ thinks Silas scornfully. Poor old Silas! So concerned about other folks' lives, but so helpless in organizing his own!

His technique with a load of hay is truly something to be considered:

"---that's Silas's one accomplishment.
 He bundles every forkful in its place,
 And tags and numbers it for future reference,
 So he can find and easily dislodge it
 In the unloading. Silas does that well
 He takes it out in bunches---
 You never see him standing on the hay
 He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself."²⁵

Now Harold Wilson has "finished school, and teaching in his college."²⁶ He has probably forgotten Silas who made fun of his load of hay. But what about Silas? Ill and desperate and wandering in his mind he has the nerve to come back to Mary

24. NORTH OF BOSTON: The Death of the Hired Man. p. 17.

25. Ibid. pp. 18-19.

26. Ibid. p. 17

and Warren whom he once deserted when they needed him most. He makes a pitiful effort to reinstate himself by making extravagant promises to help, although he is so weak he can hardly mumble. And so ends his life.

"'---nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different.'" 27

Silas, although he is shiftless, is easier to put up with than the type of hired man described by Len's wife in her pathetic monologue. Seen through a normal woman's eyes these men might not appear so undesirable; but seen through the eyes of a woman who is on the borderline between sanity and insanity, they appear wasteful, crude, and uncouth.

"'-----men
-----that make waste.
They take advantage of him (Len) shamefully,
And proud, too, of themselves for doing so.
-----, great good-for-nothings,
Sprawling about the kitchen with their talk
While I fry their bacon. Much they care!
No more put out in what they do or say 28
Than if I wasn't in the room at all.'" 28
Despicable!

An example of the tenacity with which the hired man adheres to his code is furnished by the poem, "The Code." 29 One day three men are stacking hay in a meadow over which a threatening dark cloud is gathering in the west. One, a town-bred farmer, suggests that they stack the hay carefully because it looks like rain. More than half an hour later, one of the men suddenly thrusts his pitch-fork into the ground and stolidly

27. Ibid. p. 19

28. NORTH OF BOSTON: A Servant to Servants. p. 64.

29. Ibid. The Code. p. 77.

marches off. It had taken all that time of hard thinking for the fact that he had been insulted to seep into his head!

The puzzled and amazed town bred farmer asks the other man the cause of the sudden exit. He explains:

"'James-----
 ---thought you meant to find fault with his work.
 That's what the average farmer would have meant.
 James would take time, of course, to chew it over
 Before he acted: he's just got around to act.'" 30

The farmer who had been only thinking out loud and including himself in the suggestion is non-plussed. The second man recited the hired man's unwritten but nevertheless powerful code:

"'The hand that knows his business won't be told
 To work better or faster--those two things.'" 31

All the dictators are not in Europe!

To illustrate the strength of this code, the hired man tells of his own experience with a "bulling" farmer named Sanders who "drove" his hired men. The narrator to show Sanders he "couldn't do that and get away with it," dumped a whole load of hay on him and left him, squeaking like a squeezed rat.

"'God," says the narrator, "'I'd as soon
 Murdered him as left out his middle name.'" 32

Sanders, unable to face his hired man, went home and

"'Slumped---, with both his feet
 Against the stove, the hottest day that summer.
 He looked so clean disgusted from behind

- 30. Ibid. p. 77.
- 31. Ibid. p. 79
- 32. Ibid. p. 81.

There was no one that dared to stir him up,
Or let him know that he was being looked at.'" 33

When the hired man is asked if he wasn't greatly relieved to know he hadn't killed Sanders, he replies:

"'No! and yet I don't know--it's hard to say.
I went about to kill him fair enough.'"

-----"'Did he discharge you?'"

"'Discharge me? No! He knew I did just right.'" ³⁴

The New England hired man is truly "a character" not to be managed or supervised or bossed but to be kow-towed to--- or else let severely alone. He is indeed a law unto himself and he who would try to rule it otherwise will surely come to grief.

Thus does Robert Frost paint us a picture of his neighbor and of his hired man. Robert Frost's man is, on the whole, strong, taciturn (except Brother Meserve) and self-possessed. Sometimes he is crude. Sometimes he is cruel. At all times he is a product of his environment.

33. Ibid. p. 82.

34. Ibid. p. 82.

Chapter IV

Tenderness Toward Animals

Since Robert Frost's poetry deals wholly with country life and country people, animals must, therefore, enter largely into it, for country life depends to a great extent upon the animals which are the farmer's equipment for work. These animals Frost treats as tenderly as if they were human beings. It is not, however, the barnyard animals only which concern Frost but the small wild life of the woods as well.

This concern and tenderness of Frost for small lives is especially well expressed in "The Runaway,"¹ which describes the fear of a lost young Morgan colt pitifully standing alone in a deserted meadow looking fearfully and wildly about him at the snow and the man. Suddenly he turns and thunderously runs over the pasture. Understandingly the poet comments:

"I think the little fellow's afraid of the snow.
 He isn't winter-broken. It isn't play
 With the little fellow at all. He's running away
 I doubt if even his mother could tell him, 'Sakes,
 It's only weather. He'd think she didn't know!

 Whoever it is that leaves him out so late,
¹
 Ought to be told to come and take him in.'"

Then there is the cow which gets drunk on apple cider. Frost's love of farm animals is brought out very vividly in this fable in which he describes the plight of the cow with whimsical humor.

1. NEW HAMPSHIRE: The Runaway. p. 85.

"Something inspires the only cow of late
 To make no more of a wall than an open gate,
 And think no more of wall-builders than fools.
 Her face is flecked with pomace and she drools
 A cider syrup. Having tasted fruit,
 She runs from tree to tree where lie and sweeten
 The windfalls spiked with stubble and worm-eaten.
 She leaves them bitten when she has to fly.
 She bellows on a knoll against the sky. 2
 Her udder shrivels and the milk goes dry."

Again, the poet's tenderness for farm animals is revealed in the description of the new-born calf staggering on its too long legs.

"I'm going out to fetch the little calf
 That's standing by the mother.
 It's so young,
 It totters when she licks it with her tongue." 3

Likewise, Frost describes his little horse, and as if he were a human being. When the poet stops to watch the snow falling on the woods the horse shakes his harness bells as if he were asking: "Isn't there some mistake?"

"He gives his harness bells a shake 4
 To ask if there is some mistake."

To complete the barnyard scene, there is a worthy pullet,

"Her golden leg, her coral comb, 5
 Her fluff of plumage, white as chalk," which at the
 fair "scored an almost perfect bird." 5

Very carefully her keeper waits at night while she finishes eating,

"She lingers feeding at the trough, 5
 The last to let night drive her off."

2. MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: The Cow in Apple Time. p. 45.
3. NORTH OF BOSTON: The Pasture. p. VIII.
4. NEW HAMPSHIRE: Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening. p. 87
5. A FURTHER RANGE TAKEN DOUBLY: A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury. p. 22

Frost describes this independent little pullet with tender humor:

"No human spectre at the feast
Can scant or hurry her the least.
She takes her time to take her fill.
She whets a sleepy sated bill.

And so to roost, the last to mount.

She shoulders with a wing so strong ⁵
She makes the whole flock move along."

Not only does Frost paint the farm animals tenderly but also the wild animals. In "Two Look at Two" ⁶ he describes the doe and the buck looking at two human beings as if they themselves were thinking, interested, and appreciating human beings, unafraid because there is something between them and danger as humans so often are.

As the man and woman stand near the wall, on the other side, as near the wall on her side as they on their side, stands a doe eyeing the two humans curiously:

"The difficulty of seeing what stood still,
Was in her clouded eyes: they saw no fear there.
She seemed to think that two thus they were safe.
Then, as if they were something, that, though strange,
She could not trouble her mind with too long, ⁷
She sighed and passed unscared along the wall."

After the doe has moved out of sight, a buck comes from around a spruce and stands looking at them "Quizzically with jerks of head", as to ask,

5. Ibid. p. 22

6. NEW HAMPSHIRE: Two Look at Two. p. 95.

7. Ibid. p. 96

"Why don't you make some motion?
 Or give some sign of life? Because you can't.
 I doubt if you're as living as you look.'
⁷
 Then he too passed unscared along the wall."

When the poet finds a nest on the ground from which the protecting grass has been cut, he is concerned because the nest is exposed to the light and heat but grateful that the keen-edged scythe has not injured the exposed babies. While he is helping his companion to erect a make-shift screen by means of the hay to protect the birds from "too much world at once"⁸ he is gravely concerned lest the mother-bird returning will not care for her brood "in such a change of scene,"⁸ and lest "our meddling make her more afraid."⁸ Therefore, he does not dare to take all the time he needs to his task.

"We saw the risk we took in doing good,
 But dared not spare to do the best we could
 Though harm should come of it; so built the screen
 You had begun, and gave them back their shade.
 All this to prove we cared." 9

Later he wonders how the birds got along, for, in the press of work, neither he nor his companion remember ever going back to see if they lived through that first night.

"I haven't any memory--have you?--
 Of ever coming to the place again
 To see if the birds lived the first night through,
 And so at last to learn to use their wings." 9

7. Ibid. p. 96.

8. MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: The Exposed Nest: p. 64.

9. Ibid. p. 64.

The poet is filled with pity for the birds, when, accidentally brushing the thatch of the low eaves of the cottage with his sleeves, he flushes the birds out of their nests into the dark, cold, disagreeable night.

"----- . It grieved my soul,
It started a grief within a grief,
To think their case was beyond relief--
They could not go flying about in search
Of their nest again, nor find a perch.
They must brood where they fell in mulch and mire,"
he says. 10

To make matters even more grievous, the weather is against him:

"The world was a black invisible field.
The rain by rights was snow for cold.
The wind was another layer of mould." 10

Thus, the poet's misery is complete.

In the winter-time, Frost is greatly concerned about the birds he has seen during the summer. One cold winter day just as "The west was getting out of gold,"¹¹ he is wondering about the bird whose song had stopped him there one day during the preceding summer. Apparently, he is concentrating so much on the "bird with an angelic gift,"¹¹ that he thinks he sees a bird alight on a tree. Cold as it is and late as it is, he goes around the tree twice to see if he can't find it. Disappointedly he says:

"No bird was singing in it now.
A single leaf was on a bough,
And that was all there was to see
In going twice around the tree." 11

10. WEST-RUNNING BROOK: The Thatch. p. 27.

11. NEW HAMPSHIRE: Looking for a Sunset Bird in Winter. p. 100.

Again, he expresses his concern for wild life while he is out in the frozen swamp, and a small bird flies before him. Frost is interested enough to wonder what kind of bird it is and concerned enough to walk in the opposite direction¹² in order not to frighten it.

As keenly as he misses the birds he misses the butterfly which fluttered over the sun-dappled meadows during the long hot days of summer.

"And I was glad for thee,
And glad for me, I wist."¹³

In the winter-time, however, the poet mourns for the butterfly:

"Save only me
There is none left to mourn thee in the fields."¹⁴

Sorrowfully, at the end, he finds the butterfly dead.

"I found that wing broken today!
For thou art dead, I said!"¹⁴

- 12. NORTH OF BOSTON: The Wood Pile. p. 133.
- 13. A BOY'S WILL: My Butterfly. p. 60.
- 14. Ibid. p. 61.

Chapter V

Joy in Little Things

As the human element in Robert Frost is brought out by his interest in people and in animals, so is it brought out by his capacity to find joy in little things. Because of his keen powers of observation, Frost can detect beauty and find drama in everyday life. Events and sights so familiar to other people that they do not even notice them are to him brimming over with possibilities for excitement and adventure. Why is this? Because he has the gift of really seeing--not just noticing. Consequently, because of this ability to find pleasure where he is, he is always happy.

Cleaning the pasture spring and going to the pasture for the little calf that has just been born are experiences infinitely worth sharing:

"I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;

 I sha'n't be gone long.--You come too.

 I'm going out to fetch the little calf

 I sha'n't be gone long.--You come too."

He likes to go out in the early morning to spend the day tramping the woods gathering flowers for his botanical experiments:

1. NORTH OF BOSTON: The Pasture. p. VIII.

"All for me? And not a question
 For the faded flowers gay
 That could take me from beside you
 For the ages of a day." 2

Much as he enjoys flower-gathering, he is, however, very
 glad to be welcomed home at the end of the day. 2

He enjoys mountain-climbing so much that he gets up
 early in the morning and goes out before breakfast to inquire
 about the mountain which looms over the village in which he
 has slept the night before:

"There ought to be a view around the world
 From such a mountain--if it isn't wooded
 Clear to the top.'" 3

During the discussion which ensues, the unimaginative
 old farmer who is telling the poet about the mountain says:

"'T wouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it.'" 4

Whereupon, Frost replies:

"I shouldn't climb it if I didn't want to--
 Not for the sake of climbing.'" 4

No, he will climb it because he is curious about what
 is on top.

Wherever he goes, he is never so hurried that he cannot
 take time off to enjoy the view:

"As I went down hill along the wall
 There was a gate I had leaned at for the view." 5

"Out through the fields and woods
 And over the walls I have wended;
 I have climbed the hills of view 5
 And looked at the world and descended."

2. A BOY'S WILL: Flower-Gathering. p. 24.

3. NORTH OF BOSTON: The Mountain. p. 27.

4. Ibid. p. 29.

5. MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: Meeting and Passing. p. 33.

The simpler and closer to nature life is, the happier Frost becomes. He thinks that the Lorens who sell blueberries for shoes live nicely:

"'Just taking what nature is willing to give,
Not forcing her hand with harrow and plow.'" 6

Likewise, the life of the gum-gatherer because of its simplicity appeals to the poet. Undisturbed by the perplexities of ordinary city life, the gum-gatherer lives in a remote deserted shack. He gathers the gum which "Like uncut
jewels, dull and rough"⁷ he brings to market in a cotton sack.

After Frost has learned how the gum-gatherer lives, he says:

"I told him this is a pleasant life
To set your breast to the bark of trees
That all your days are dim beneath,
And reaching up with a little knife,
To loose the resin and take it down⁷
And bring it to market when you please."

He enjoys the swishing sound of trees as they sway in the wind. More than any other noise he likes their sound near the house and listens to it until he loses all track of time:

"I wonder about the trees
Why do we wish to bear
Forever the noise of these
More than another noise
So close to our dwelling place?
We suffer them by the day
Till we lose all measure of pace,
And fixity in our joys,⁸
And acquire a listening air."

6. NORTH OF BOSTON: Blueberries. p. 60.

7. MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: The Gum-Gatherer. p. 72

8. Ibid. The Sound of Trees. p. 99.

Watching a huge bon-fire at night gives him a wild thrill of delight. He enjoys seeing the flames stretch toward the sky like swords as the fire roars and rustles and crackles.

"Oh, let's go up the hill and scare ourselves,

By setting fire to all the brush we piled

Oh, let's not wait for rain to make it safe.

Let's not care what we do tonight.

Divide it? No! But burn it as one pile

The way we piled it. And let's be the talk

Of people brought to windows by a light

Thrown from somewhere against their wall-paper.

Rouse them all, both the free and not so free

With saying what they'd like to do to us

Let's all but bring to life this old volcano,

And scare ourselves. Let wild fire loose we will."⁹

Apparently swinging on birches was once one of Frost's favorite out-door sports, for when he sees "birches bend to left and right,"¹⁰ he likes "to think some boy's been swinging them"¹⁰ as he has driven the cows to and from the pasture. Understandingly, Frost says it would have to be a country-boy too far removed from town to have learned to play base-ball; therefore he would have to create his own amusement and, most of the time, play alone. Swinging on birches is a pastime which requires only one player.

"I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows--
One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again

⁹. Ibid. The Bonfire. p. 53.
¹⁰. Ibid. Birches. p. 37.

Until he took the stiffness out of them,
 And not one but hung limp, not one was left
 For him to conquer. He learned all there was
 To learn about not launching out too soon
 And so not carrying the tree away
 Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
 To the top branches, climbing gratefully
 With the same pains you use to fill a cup
 Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
 Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
 Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
 So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
 And so I dream of going back to be." 11

An adult thinking longingly of past boyhood pleasures.

Frost's reaction at the sight of a blueberry pasture is
 as vivid as another person's reaction at the Taj-Mahal might
 be. Describing the blueberries he says:

"You ought to have seen what I saw on my way
 To the village, through Patterson's pasture today:
 Blueberries as big as the end of your thumb,
 Real sky-blue, and heavy, and ready to drum
 In the cavernous pail of the first one to come!
 And all right together, not some of them green 12
 And some of them ripe! You ought to have seen!---

You ought to have seen how it looked in the rain,
 The fruit mixed with water in layers of leaves,
 Like two kinds of jewels, a vision for thieves.'" 12

And he makes plans to pick the fruit next day with as much
 enthusiasm as another might expend on planning an ocean voyage:

"We'll pick in the Patterson's pasture this year.
 We'll go in the morning, that is, if it's clear,
 And the sun shines out warm: 13
 the vines must be wet.'" 13

The changes in the seasons are a never-ending source of

11. Ibid. pp. 38-39.

12. NORTH OF BOSTON: Blueberries. p. 56.

13. Ibid. p. 63.

delight to Frost. He may be in quiet rapture one minute about the smell of new-mown hay and the next about the blanket of snow on the ground. He is as happy in one season as he is in another.

Frost is delighted by a spring evening in the sugar orchard when the sap is running. The sparks from the fire tangling in the bare branches of the trees and "the bear-skin
14
rug of snow" underneath give him keen pleasure.

"From where I lingered in a lull in March
Outside the sugar-house one night for choice,
I called the fireman with a careful voice
 '.
'O fireman, give the fire another stoke,
And send more sparks up chimney with the smoke.'
I thought a few might tangle, as they did,
Among bare maple boughs, and in the rare
Hill atmosphere not cease to glow,
And so be added to the moon up there." 14

On the March evening he catches a glimpse of something palely, ghostly white in among the trees at dusk. For one thrillingly gloriously happy moment he thinks it is flowers-- despite the time of year. He stands gazing at this sight trying to pretend to himself that it is really flowers.

"And there", says the poet, "I said the truth (and
 we moved on):
A young birch clinging to its last year's leaves." 15

In the spring he rejoices also in the fresh flowers, white orchards, and singing birds:

14. NEW HAMPSHIRE: Evening in a Sugar Orchard. p. 102.
15. Ibid. A Boundless Moment. p. 101

"Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
 And give us not to think so far away
 As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
 All simply in the springing of the year.

Oh, give us pleasure in the orchard white,
 And
 And
 And make us happy in the darting bird
 That suddenly above the bees is heard." 16

When he is putting in the seed, so engrossed is he in
 his task that he is loathe to leave it even at the end of the
 day when supper is waiting for him:

"How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
 On through the watching for that early birth
 When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,

The sturdy seedling with arched body comes 17
 Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs."

Blue butterflies flying around in early spring on a day
 even when snow-flakes flutter down intermittently are pro-
 phetic of good to come. He appreciates the "unmixed color
 18
 on the wing" which reminds him of the flowers soon to be here
 too.

"But these are flowers that fly and all but sing:
 And now from having ridden out desire
 They lie closed over in the wind and cling 18
 Where wheels have freshly sliced the April mire."

One summer day, he is thrilled to find a meadow "sun-
 19
 shaped and jewel small" where the air is fragrant with
 19
 flowers. There he picks "a thousand orchises," for every

16. A BOY'S WILL: A Prayer in Spring. p. 23
17. MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: Putting in the Seed. p. 43.
18. NEW HAMPSHIRE: Blue Butterfly Day. p. 89
19. A BOY'S WILL: Rose Pogonias. p. 25.

spear of grass is "tipped with wings of color."¹⁹ Then he says:

"We raised a simple prayer
Before we left the spot,
That in the general mowing
That place might be forgot;
Or if not at all so favoured,
Obtain such grace of hours,
That none should mow the grass there
While so confused with flowers." 19

Just as Frost enjoys the spring and summer so does he enjoy the fall.

One chilly autumn evening he goes to fetch water from the brook in a field behind the house. He is glad of the excuse to go to the brook because the evening is very beautiful, because the field is his, and because the woods are there. Possessions which others take for granted give Frost keen enjoyment.

"Not loth to have excuse to go,
Because the autumn eve was fair
(Though chill), because the fields were ours,
And by the brook our woods were there." 20

One October day is so hauntingly beautiful that he begs it not to hurry to evening which will blot out the sights and sounds of fall. In order that he may longer enjoy the colorful autumn foliage, he asks that the leaves drop slowly: one in the morning and one at noon. He enjoys the purplish haze which blurs the sun and the film of amethyst which envelops

19. A BOY'S WILL: Rose Pogonias. P. 25.

20. Ibid. Going for Water. p. 37.

the earth:

"Slow, slow!" he says,
 "For the grapes' sake, if they were all,
 Whose leaves already are burnt with frost,
 Whose clustered fruit must else be lost---
 For the grapes' sake along the wall." 21

Not only does Frost enjoy spring and summer walks but also depth of winter walks. On a winter evening when he is walking alone, he enjoys looking at the lighted cottages--
 22
 "Up to their shining eyes in snow." He is not lonely, for he feels as if the people within the cottages were his companions. He hears a violin, and he glimpses through white lace curtained windows "youthful forms and youthful faces." 22

One winter day, Frost wakes up apparently with a fit of the blues. However, when a crow from a hemlock tree shakes down some snow on him, the poet experiences a change of mood:

"The way a crow
 Shook down on me
 The dust of snow
 From a hemlock tree

 Has given my heart
 A change of mood
 And saved some part
 Of the day I had rued." 23

Frost's keen sensitiveness to beauty in common ordinary everyday things is nowhere more beautifully expressed than in the lovely little lyric, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy
 24
 Evening." Although he is far from home and the snow is

21. Ibid. October. p. 58

22. NORTH OF BOSTON. Good Hours. p. 128 of COLLECTED POEMS

23. NEW HAMPSHIRE: Dust of Snow. p. 82

24. Ibid. Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening. p. 87

falling steadily and earnestly, he stops to enjoy the striking study in black and white.

"Whose woods these are I think I know,
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep." 24

Because of his capacity for finding beauty and joy in little things and because of his ability to transfer this beauty into enjoyable poetry, Robert Frost has become what he is: the most readable poet of the twentieth century. Perhaps unconsciously he is a teacher also, for his poetry can teach the reader to look for happiness where he is instead of longing for the unknown and the remote.

Chapter VI

Robert Frost's Sense of Humor

Although Robert Frost writes so realistically about morbid people who represent the left-overs of the old Yankee stock, and paints the pathos of abandoned New England farm-houses, he yet maintains a spicy sense of humor which is to his work as salt is to meat. It is not, however, an explosive or bitter humor. On the contrary, it oftentimes emerges as mere whimsy, always quiet, kindly, sympathetic and understanding even when he is dealing with people who are more conventional than sincere. He is sometimes satiric in his criticisms of life, but it is only teasing satire or mischievous and affectionate laughter. Combined with the satire there is a broader, kindlier humor that makes for realism and enables him to live happily with the people whom he so amusingly satirizes.

"In his talk everything that is pretentious and solemn is disregarded. Humorous reminiscence, shrewd comment come from him. He makes a just appraisal of the worth and work of sincere and able men and women, and he can make the self-seeker ludicrous. He lets such people go some of the way with him, but he knows what they're after; he is glad when they get what they've been after, but they do now know that he has had fun watching them."¹

1. RECOGNITION OF ROBERT FROST: edited by Richard Thornton. p. 162.

But then, "'all the fun's in how you say a thing.'" ²

A fitting example of Robert Frost's quiet whimsical humor is "Mending Wall." ³ The narrator, speaking of the stones which he and his neighbor "beyond the hill," are replacing says:

"We have to use a spell to make them balance:
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!' he admonishes the stones. ³

Realizing the futility of the task, the narrator says of his short-sighted neighbor:

"He is all pine and I am apple orchard
My apple trees will never get across ³
And eat the cones under the pines, I tell him."

It is only the narrator's sense of humor which makes this humdrum and futile task bearable.

Again, Frost's whimsy appears in the wistful banter between Warren and Mary, adding a humorously human touch to an otherwise tragic story. Warren's impulsiveness and impetuosity caused by the inward struggle between kindness and practicality is amusing. While Mary is considerably whispering lest Silas overhear and be hurt, Warren yells impatiently.

Warren: "'I can't afford to pay any fixed wages;
though I wish I could.'"

Mary: "'Someone else can.'"

Warren: "'Then someone else will have to.'" ⁴

2. NORTH OF BOSTON: The Mountain. p. 29.

3. Ibid. Mending Wall. p. 11.

4. Ibid. The Death of the Hired Man. p. 15.

Silas's comments on education as reported by Mary are amusing. Incidentally, Silas makes them to save his own face:

"He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying
He studied Latin like the violin
Because he liked it--that an argument!
He said he couldn't make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong--
Which showed how much good school had ever done him."⁵

Thus, the warm-hearted and perceptive author, who believes in the potential worth of humanity, treats poor old Silas with humor as well as discerning tenderness.

In the same manner, Frost treats the man "who," he says,

"Moved so slow
With white-faced oxen in a heavy cart,
It seemed no harm to stop him altogether."⁶

Although this farmer has lived near a mountain all his life, he, somehow, never did get around to climbing it.

"It doesn't seem so much to climb a mountain
You've worked around the foot of all your life.
What would I do? Go in my overalls,
With a big stick, the same as when the cows
Haven't come down to the bars at milking time?
Or with a shotgun for a stray black bear?
'Wouldn't seem real for climbing it.'" ⁷

The man's almost complete inertia tends to arouse a feeling of pathos. However, because of the timely humor injected by means of clever phraseology, the author saves the situation.

In like manner, the professor and Lafe in "A Hundred

5. Ibid. p. 18.

6. Ibid. The Mountain. p. 24.

7. Ibid. p. 24.

Collars" present an amusing situation, for Frost satirizes both. When the hotel clerk suggests he share a hotel room with someone, the professor asks, "'Who is it?'"⁸

Whereupon, the impudent clerk replies: "'A man.'"⁸

"'So I should hope.'" retorts the perturbed professor.

When the professor enters the room which he is to share, the first occupant, Lafe, volunteers the re-assuring information:

"'I'm not so drunk I can't take care of myself.'"⁹

After the clerk has departed, Lafe, who is shirtless, informs his room-mate, the professor:

"'I'm moving into a size-larger shirt.'"

Then follows a discussion on shirts in which the professor says he wears size fourteen.

In the meantime the professor stands on one foot, then on another, just where the clerk left him. Finally, Lafe says:

"'Sit down or lie down, friend; you make me nervous.'"¹¹

"The Doctor made a subdued dash for it,¹²
And propped himself at bay against a pillow"--

dressed and with his shoes on.

Lafe wants to remove the professor's shoes. The latter, however, says--and one can almost hear his teeth chattering while he says it--:

- 8. NORTH OF BOSTON: A Hundred Collars. p. 32.
- 9. Ibid. p. 33.
- 10. Ibid. p. 34.
- 11. Ibid. p. 35.
- 12. Ibid. p. 36.

"Don't touch me, please--
 I say, don't touch me, please. 13
 I'll not be put to bed by you, my man.'" 13
 "My man, is it? You talk like a professor." 13

Realizing the professor is thoroughly scared, Lafe says sarcastically:

"Who wants to cut your number fourteen throat!" 14 As much as to say that if he were going to do any throat-cutting, he'd choose a more worthwhile throat!

After that, the situation is not quite so strained. Lafe describes his travels through the country. Speaking of his mare, he says:

"She's got so she turns in at every house
 As if she had some sort of curvature." 15

Later, after he has quieted the timid professor by the accounts of his experiences with people, he offers him a drink:

"Sorry there is no cup to give you a drink.
 I drink out of the bottle--not your style.
 Mayn't I offer you---?" 15

And the terrified professor exclaims "No, no, no, thank you," one imagines, with much emphasis.

Again, Lafe brings up the matter of the hundred (more or less) collars which he has promised the professor. The latter, however, says:

- 13. Ibid. p. 37.
- 14. Ibid. p. 38.
- 15. Ibid. p. 39.

"'Really, friend, I can't let you. You--may need them.'" 15

"'Not till I shrink,'" ¹⁵ comes back Lafe.

As he is leaving the room, for he has "just begun the night," ¹⁵ Lafe says:

"'There's nothing I'm afraid of like scared people.'" ¹⁵

Thus re-assured the professor, the personification of Timidity, "slid down the pillow," ¹⁵ and, one hopes, to sleep.

Just as Frost has fun with the timid professor and the crude business-man, he has fun with Loren of the blueberry pasture. Frost says Loren did not speak to him when they met, but he (Loren) "thought a big thought." ¹⁶

.

'I have left those there berries, I shrewdly suspect,
To ripen too long. I am greatly to blame.'

I wish you had seen his perpetual bow--
And the air of the youngsters! Not one of them
turned, ¹⁶
And they looked so solemn-absurdly concerned."

Of course, they were "solemn-absurdly concerned;" they were intent on being the first to get at the blueberries!

The poet describes Loren's attitude when he (the poet) had once asked Loren about the possibility of finding blueberries nearby. Loren pretended to be totally ignorant of the existence of blueberries in the vicinity.

15. Ibid. p. 39

16. NORTH OF BOSTON: Blueberries. p. 59.

"I almost provoked poor Loren to mirth
 By going to him of all people on earth
 To ask if he knew any fruit to be had
 For the picking. The rascal, he said he'd be glad
 To tell if he knew. But the year had been bad.
 There had been some berries--but those were all gone.
 He didn't say where they had been. He went on:
 'I'm sure--I'm sure'--as polite as could be.
 He spoke to his wife in the door,
 'Let me see, Mame, we don't know any good berrying place.'
 It was all he could do to keep a straight face.'" 17

On no! Loren did not know where there were blueberries!
 But now, he is going to be surprised. The poet in the meantime
 has been around.

In much the same way that he has fun with Loren, the
 poet has fun with the dictatorial farmer on whom the hired
 man dumped a load of hay just to teach him a much needed
 lesson.

"But what he liked was someone to encourage." 18

Only his encouragement took the form of driving.

"Them that he couldn't lead he'd get behind
 And drive." 18

Later, after he has unburied himself, the farmer goes
 home and huddles at the kitchen stove on the hottest day in
 summer.

"He looked so clean disgusted from behind
 There was no one that dared to stir him up,
 Or let him know that he was being looked at." 19

Again by means of clever conversation, the author saves
 a situation which might have been tragic.

17. Ibid. p. 60.

18. NORTH OF BOSTON: The Code. pp. 76, 77.

19. Ibid. p. 77.

In "The Generations of Men" Frost has an opportunity to air his opinions on ancestor worship. This he does in his usual whimsical manner.

"And those by the name of Stark gathered in Bow,

Someone had literally run to earth
In an old cellar hole in a by-road
The origin of all the family there.
Thence they were sprung so numerous a tribe
That now not all the houses left in town
Made shift to shelter them with-out the help
Of here and there a tent in grove and orchard.

Nothing would do but they must fix a day
To stand together on the crater's verge
That turned them on the world, and try to fathom
The past and get some strangeness out of it.
But rain spoiled all." 20

Two of the clan, however, idle down to the old cellar-hole where they discuss the family.

"The town is full of Chases, Lowes, and Baileys,
All claiming some priority in Starkness.'" 21

'-----my mother was a Stark several times over,
and by marrying father 21
No more than brought us back into the name.'" 21

"D'you know a person so related to herself
Is supposed to be mad.'" 21

Then through one of them who touches on the subject of Yankee pride in ancestry, Frost "goes to town" on the subject.

"-----What will we come to
With all this pride of ancestry, we Yankees?

'But don't you think we some-times make too much
Of the old stock? What counts is the ideals.
And those will bear some keeping still about.'" 21

20. NORTH OF BOSTON: The Generations of Men. p. 83.

21. Ibid. p. 85.

As the boy and girl talk they pretend to see pictures of
bygone Starks in the tangled rasp-berry vines of the cellar.

"'---I see---a little, little boy,

.

He's groping in the cellar after jam,

He thinks it's dark and it's flooded with daylight.'" 21

"'I can make out old Grandsir Stark distinctly,--

With his pipe in his mouth and his brown jug--

Bless you, it isn't Grandsir Stark, it's Granny,

But the pipe's there and smoking and the jug.

She's after cider, the old girl, she's thirsty;

Here's hoping she gets her drink and gets out safely.'" 21

When the boy informs the girl that she resembles her
grandmother, the girl exclaims:

"'You poor, dear, great, great, great, great, Granny!'"

"'See that you get her greatness right, Don't stint her.'" 21

Thus, with much whimsy Frost lets it be known that Granny
is the Past, and it is better that people do not live in the
Past.

Besides having fun with people--including his Mayflower
ancestors, Frost has fun with himself. "Out walking in the
frozen swamp one grey day,"²² he becomes bewildered because

"----- . The view was all in lines

.

Too much alike-----

----- to say for certain I was here

Or somewhere else." 22

Then he talks about a bird who thought the poet had designs
on his tail feathers "like one who takes everything said as
personal to himself."²²

21. Ibid. p. 85

22. NORTH OF BOSTON: The Wood Pile. p. 133.

She answers laughingly:

"'Put it on top of something that's on top
Of something else.'" 27

As she keeps staring out the window, a man asks 27
"'What are you seeing out the window, lady?'"

To which she replies:

"'Never was I beladied so before.
Would evidence of having been called lady
More than so many times make me a lady
In common law, I wonder.'" 27

In "Brown's Descent or the Will-Nilly Slide." Robert Frost humorously defends the Yankees who "are what they always were" in tenacity and vigor, although some maintain "our stock was petered out." One late afternoon when Brown is doing the chores by lantern light on his hill-top farm,

"-----the gale
Got him by something he had on
And blew him out on the icy crust 28
That cased the world, and he was gone!"

He stamps, swings his hands describing arcs with the lantern light which everyone for miles can see, and "said things to himself" as he careens madly down the hill

Faster or slower as he chanced
Sitting or standing as he chose,
According as he feared to risk
His neck, or thought to spare his clothes."
He couldn't climb that slippery slope;

Or even thought of standing there
Until the January thaw
Should take the polish off the crust
He bowed with grace to natural law,

27. Ibid. p. 19.

28. MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: Brown's Descent. p. 67.

And then went round it on his feet.
-----a matter of several miles." 29

Now who says Yankees are not what they used to be?

Thus with understanding humor, Frost describes all kinds and conditions of people. Never does he get bitter or laugh cruelly at misfits, incompetents, or the nasty nice. Always he paints the prejudices and the insincerities of people with a kindliness that, somehow, leaves the object of his satire with certain vestiges of an inalienable dignity.

Chapter VII

Attitude toward Love, Home, and Marriage

As the human element in Frost reveals itself in his desire to be close to people, in his sympathetic penetration into the heart and mind of his neighbor, and in his whimsical, quiet humor, so is it revealed in his idea of home, of love, and of marriage. His attitude toward home is nowhere more effectively expressed than in the definitions offered by Warren and Mary while they are arguing about Silas.

"Home is the place where when you have to go there,
They have to take you in," contributes Warren. 1

"I should have called it something you somehow
haven't to deserve," warm-heartedly adds Mary. 1

Education, respect, friendship, we have to earn. Home, however, like the parts of the body, is standard equipment. The prodigal son, when at the end of his rope, even though somewhat embarrassed and ashamed, felt free to return home--the place in which he had probably done the most whining and complaining--after all other places had closed their doors. So it is with Silas. "Home" to him is the place from which he had complacently taken his leave one midsummer day when his services were most needed. Yet it is to this place he returns when, too weak and too ill to work and wandering in

his mind, no one else cares to have him. That fact alone indicates what the atmosphere of Mary's and Warren's home must be. And it must be the atmosphere created by Warren's and Mary's deep and understanding affection which draws the hired man to them in his last illness, even though they can both argue and disagree. Certainly theirs is not a luxurious home nor are Warren and Mary well-to-do, for the man says:

"I can't afford to pay ¹
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could."

Yet one may imagine their home as a refuge for the tired, the discouraged, the down-and-out, even the sinning.

²
In "Love and a Question," one finds a young man hesitating about taking into his new home a stranger burdened by care who has asked shelter for the night. The man has to decide whether he will take in the poor, broken, old man and thus allow trouble to come in too, or if he and his young wife will live exclusively for and by themselves.

"The bridegroom thought it little to give
A dole of bread, a purse,
A heartfelt prayer for the poor of God,
Or for the rich a curse;
But whether or not a man was asked
To mar the love of two
By harboring woe in the bridal house,
The bridegroom wished he knew." ²

Marriage to Frost does not mean the cloistered seclusion of two human beings from all contact with the universal hardships.

1. NORTH OF BOSTON: The Death of the Hired Man. p. 14
2. A BOY'S WILL. p. 16

3

"Flower Gathering" like "The Death of the Hired Man" shows deep and understanding affection between husband and wife.

"I left you in the morning
 And in the morning glow,
 You walked a way beside me
 To make me sad to go.
 Do you know me in the gloaming,
 Gaunt and dusty grey with roaming?
 Are you dumb because you know me not,
 Or dumb because you know?"

All for me? And not a question
 For the faded flowers gay
 That could take me from beside you
 For the ages of a day?
 They are yours, and be the measure
 Of their worth for you to treasure,
 The measure of the little while
 That I've been long away."

As Warren's and Mary's feeling for each other is revealed in their wistful banter, Helen's and Fred Cole's⁴ feeling for each other emerges in good-natured teasing. Brother Meserve chose to go into their home instead of some other couple's probably because of the atmosphere of their home. Besides, Helen and Fred are not living for themselves any more than Warren and Mary are. Exasperated as the Coles are with Brother Meserve, they are selfless enough to worry about him and about his family. Theirs is a love that is nourished on service to others just as Mary's and Warren's.

Len's home presents a different aspect from Mary's and

3. Ibid. p. 24.

4. MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: Snow. pp. 79-98.

Warren's as well as Helen's and Fred's largely because of lack of understanding between Len and his wife. This lack of understanding results, as we have already seen, in Len's wife becoming mentally abnormal. She herself admits that the hired men pay no attention to her and she pays no attention whatsoever to them although she cooks for them. This poem is an example of what lack of companionship and affection⁵ mean in a home.

The atmosphere created by John and Estelle in their home is one of tenseness, regret, and selfishness because John does not respect Estelle. What John feels for himself is the grande passion. He lets Estelle work for him, but he never praises, encourages, or thanks her. The result? The home, such as it is, is disrupted when Estelle leaves.

These homes, both the happy and not so happy, are representative, not of the homes of the great men and women of the earth, of the titled and the highly gifted, but of the commonplace, everyday people of the countryside. Moreover, Robert Frost himself knows the toiling, thwarted people whom he describes and their homes.

Chapter VIII

Conclusion

Thus emerges Robert Frost, poet of the people, who saw the poetic possibilities of his neighbor and put them into verse. As we have already seen, his men and women are the type who are so close to us that we have never really seen them because we have taken them entirely too much for granted. Frost, however, with his keen powers of observation has seen them, and with pity and discerning tenderness has probed deeply, yet gently, into their hearts and minds, and pictured his findings with swift, sure strokes.

What magic does Frost use in presenting characters which once seen are never forgotten? What tricks of trade, does he, as a poet, produce from his bag? The outstanding feature of all his poetry is that he uses the conversational tone making the metrical patterns subordinate to the cadences of human speech.¹ Only an exceptionally sensitive and gifted poet could achieve such results. Furthermore, Frost's lively feeling for situation and his ability to reproduce it as seen in "The Death of the Hired Man" gives his work intense reality.²

To that add his sensitive powers of perception which react to touch, sight, sound, and smell.³ Then one has the answer

1. ROBERT FROST: A Study in Sense and Sensibility by G. B. Munson. p. 89.
2. RECOGNITION OF ROBERT FROST edited by Richard Thornton. p. 32.
3. THE ART AND THOUGHT OF ROBERT FROST by Lawrence Thompson. p. 27.

to all that makes the wheels go round. Consequently, Amy, Len's wife, Silas, Warren and Mary, the Coles, Brother Meserve, and John and Estelle, all parade before us, not as vague abstractions, but as intensely real personalities, disciplined by the wilderness, and thrifty, painstaking, industrious, and stoical.

In closing, let us summarize briefly Frost's philosophy of life--if one may so term it. Since this thesis deals with the human element in his work, surely his views on the general aspects of life deserve consideration.

Speaking of Hyla Brook whose waters disappear in the summertime, he says: "We love the things we love for what they are."⁴ Not for anything that he can gain from them materially does he love things or people.

Sometimes when life gets too complex and hurried, Frost wishes to escape.

"It's when I'm weary of consideration
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.

.
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again. ⁵
That would be good both going and coming back."

Humanly enough, he longs to get away from it all, but only for a little while. He knows that after he has had a long sleep, life will again revolve properly for him.

4. MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: Hyla Brook. p. 34.

5. Ibid. Birches. p. 39.

The plight of the cow who scorned the pasture once she had tasted apples is proof that we are nourished by our proper food. The cow's udder shriveled and she went dry.

That there is a mingling of sorrow and joy in loss and gain is the philosophy so tersely expressed in the epigram, "Nothing Gold Can Stay"

"Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay." 7

"Nothing gold can stay" because life presupposes changes which lead to fulfillment.

There can be no pleasure without pain, and no pain without pleasure.

"Now no joy but lacks salt
That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain

Of tears, the aftermark
Of almost too much love,
The sweet of bitter bark
And burning clove." 8

Frost is not interested in illusions as is evidenced in "The Kitchen Chimney"

"Builder, in building the little house,
In every way you may please yourself;
But please me in the kitchen chimney:
Don't build me a chimney upon a shelf.

6. Ibid. The Cow in Apple Time. p. 45.
7. NEW HAMPSHIRE: p. 84.
8. Ibid. To Earthward. p. 91.

However far you must go for bricks,
 Whatever they cost a-piece or a pound,
 Buy me enough for a full-length chimney,
 And build the chimney clear from the ground.

It's not that I'm greatly afraid of fire,
 But I never heard of a house that throve
 (And I know of one that didn't thrive)⁹
 Where the chimney started above the stove."

The poet accepts life stoically by living each day at a time and not worrying about the future. This he sets forth in "Acceptance."

"When the spent sun throws up its rays on cloud
 And goes down burning into the gulf below,
 No voice in nature is heard to cry aloud
 At what has happened. Birds, at least, must know
 It is the change to darkness in the sky:
 Murmuring something quiet in her breast,
 One bird begins to close a faded eye;
 Or overtaken too far from his nest,
 Hurrying low above the grave, some waif
 Swoops just in time to his remembered tree.
 At most he thinks or twitters safely, 'Safe!
 Now let the night be dark for all of me.
 Let the night be too dark for me to see¹⁰
 Into the future. Let what will be, be.'"

Desert places are always lonely and somber, but the desert places of the mind are much more dangerous than those of the earth. Describing the snow falling, and the animals "smothered in their lairs," he says, "The loneliness includes me unawares." Then he goes on to describe mental deserts:

"And lonely as it is that loneliness
 Will be more lonely ere it will be less--
 A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
 With no expression, nothing to express.

9. Ibid. p. 99.

10. WEST-RUNNING BROOK: Acceptance. p. 15.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars--on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places."¹¹

And so, the human element in this New England poet reveals itself not only through his keen powers of observation of the New England peasant but through his sympathy for and understanding of all people everywhere. With a rich humanity, a great realism, and a gentle humility, Robert Frost reports with unerring pen what he has seen, heard, and felt day by day as he moved among, worked with, and shared life with these obscure, silent people of the stern, rugged countryside. With confidence, humor, and fidelity he presents these children of adversity: their weaknesses, their strength, their austerity, and their sturdy honesty.

11. A FURTHER RANGE TAKEN SINGLY: Desert Places. p. 48.

Bibliography

- Boynton, Percy H. Some Contemporary Americans The Personal Equation in Literature pp. 33-49 1924
University of Chicago Press
- Church, R. Eight for Immortality Robert Frost a prophet in his own country pp. 27-40 1941 London. J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd.
- Coffin, Robert P. Tristram New Poetry of New England John Hopkins 1938
- Frost, Robert A Boy's Will Henry Holt and Company 1915
North of Boston Henry Holt and Company 1915
Mountain Interval Henry Holt and Company 1916
New Hampshire Henry Holt 1923
West-Running Brook Henry Holt 1928
A Further Range New York Henry Holt and Company 1936
A Witness Tree Henry Holt Company 1942
Collected Poems New York Henry Holt and Company Inc. 1936 Halcyon House Edition, March 1939
- Lewisohn, Ludwig The Story of American Literature New York The Modern Library Edition published by Random House, Inc. 1939 pp. 499-501
- Lowell, Amy Tendencies in Modern American Poetry: Robert Frost pp. 79-136 1917 New York The MacMillan Company
- Munson, G. B. Robert Frost: a study in sensibility and good sense. Doran 1927 New York
- Thompson, Lawrence Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost New York Henry Holt and Company 1942
- Thornton, Richard Recognition of Robert Frost twenty-fifth anniversary. New York Henry Holt and Company 1937

[illegible]

NOT TO BE TAKEN
FROM THE LIBRARY

A barcode sticker from Boston University is affixed to the bottom right of the book's front cover. The sticker features a series of vertical black bars of varying widths and the text "BOSTON UNIVERSITY" at the top.

1 1719 02481 3968

ACCOMPRESS BINDER

DFS 250-P7 EM3

ADCO PRODUCTS, INC.

